

Prison re-entry OpEd

By John C. Carney, Jr.

For the last year or so, we have read and heard about the serious problems we have with inmate healthcare in Delaware's prisons. It is an important issue by itself, but there are other equally pressing issues for inmates and ex-offenders re-entering society that also need to be addressed.

Providing adequate healthcare in our prisons is the morally right thing to do. The measures already implemented to help improve our current system – independent review of care by physicians in the Department of Public Health, hiring of oversight staff to monitor the medical contractor, evaluation of staff levels, chart reviews – should help, as will additional steps being developed by the Department of Corrections.

Improving prison health care is also the practical thing to do. It is one of many issues, such as job training, drug counseling and education that prepare more than 5,000 inmates to return to Delaware's streets in any one-year period. Effective reentry programs addressing these areas can make the difference between an ex-offender either becoming a productive citizen or returning to a life of crime. Better focusing on reentry programs will save taxpayer dollars, reduce crime, and improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods.

That's because our inmate population does not remain in prison forever. In fact, most of those who are sent to prison only serve for a relatively short time. When they are released, they return to the same neighborhoods they lived in when they committed the crimes that sent them to jail. One of the major findings of the Wilmington HOPE Commission, which I co-chaired, was that this population can have a serious negative effect in these neighborhoods. And so, improving reentry programs was an important recommendation of the Commission.

In the City of Wilmington, the statistics are staggering. In 2005, more than 1,200 ex-offenders released from prison returned to one of just three zip codes in Wilmington, 19801, 19802 and 19805.

This concentration of ex-offenders has tremendous influence on neighborhoods that are already dealing with many of society's most difficult pressures, including poverty, single-parent families and violence. Too many of these former inmates return to these communities with the same lack of education and skills that had a part in leading them to the criminal behavior that sent them to prison. Having served time, these ex-offenders face the additional challenge of a criminal record, which impedes efforts to get a job. Often these ex-offenders also find it difficult to find a place to live, in part because they are usually banned from publicly financed housing. And their health care and substance abuse treatment ends the day they walk out the prison door. With so many obstacles to self-sufficiency and making positive contributions to their family and community, it's not surprising that so many return to what they know – crime.

The Delaware Reentry Roundtable, held last fall, identified some of the biggest needs of ex-offenders leaving prison, including increased coordination between the agencies and organizations that provide reentry support, proper transitional care for those with physical or mental problems, and more education and job skills.

These issues and others must be addressed if these ex-offenders are going to return to society with a brighter outlook and a chance to be productive citizens. Quality health care, job training and counseling, substance abuse treatment and a network of services outside of prison are necessities.

Following up on the recommendations of the Roundtable and the HOPE Commission, in my role as the chairman of the Criminal Justice Council, I formed a Reentry Subcommittee. The committee is comprised of members representing the Department of Corrections, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education and the Division of Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Mental Health with staff from the Criminal Justice Council. I have directed the committee to evaluate the programs that are currently underway in Delaware prisons and to find ways to improve coordination and create more successful programs. I also asked them to identify additional programs to address the challenges of reentry that are already working in other states

One program that already exists is The Way Home, which has had tremendous success in Sussex County. This program is designed to help ex-offenders being released from prison make a successful transition back into the community, thereby reducing the rate of recidivism for the participants. With only three full-time caseworkers, no set annual funding and very limited transitional housing at its disposal, the program has achieved success by creating lasting relationships and getting the community to buy-in to the effort.

Way Home caseworkers begin working with prisoners even before they are released from prison, assessing what specific support they will need when they return to the community. These needs can range from housing, transportation and money to clothing, food and counseling. The program creates a network of support for ex-offenders that include the community, the Department of Corrections, and civic and faith-based groups. Sometimes that support requires meeting an ex-offender at the prison gate on the day of release and giving them a ride to temporary housing and a few dollars to get them started. I suggested and the Governor recommended funding in the Fiscal Year '08 budget to start to provide these services on a statewide basis.

Substance abuse is an issue for about three-quarters of those who serve time in prison. One of the most effective programs to address substance abuse in this area is the Key and Crest, which is a continuum of care for those prisoners with substance abuse issues. The Key is for inmates, while the Crest is for those who are transitioning back into the community and serving time at a halfway house. There is also a community supervision component for ex-offenders. For those who complete all three components, there is a

high rate of success. The basic idea is to instill responsibility in ex-offenders and help them take control of their lives.

As with most programs, the Key and Crest has limited capacity. We need to expand the number of slots available in these programs and others that have proven to be effective. These are investments we can't afford not to make.

We must continue to aggressively enforce our laws and police our neighborhoods to keep people safe and secure in their homes and communities. Criminals who violate the law must be punished. At the same time, we must do a better job of rehabilitating inmates while they are behind bars so that when they return to the community they will be less likely to offend again. It is in all our interests to do so and it should be a priority for our state now and in the future.

John C. Carney, Jr., is the Lt. Governor of Delaware.